

Findings and Recommendations

Representative Lieser

SJ15 Working Group

Evaluating federal land management: The EQC responds

Study task: Evaluate public lands presently managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Response: Reviewed land management by county. Formed SJ15 Work Group that met bi-monthly through the interim.

Produced study matrix to identify risk and concerns, the desired corrections, barriers to the desired correction and solutions. Panelists included experts in legal matters related to federal lands, forest managers, representatives of land management agencies, and representatives of other western states.

Finding: Counties depend on federal payments for infrastructure improvements including roads, county facilities and other projects. PILT payments have declined partially due to reduced revenue streams from federal land management and also due to reduced congressional appropriations. In recent years, the Secure Rural Schools program that has been reauthorized annually is at risk.

Finding: Large scale bark beetle and other forest insect epidemics have created heavy fuel loads throughout the forests of the western United States. These natural events are caused by aging forests, decades of fire suppression, and climate change. Since the late 1980's forest conditions described above have contributed to large, intense fires that are impacting communities and creating financial burdens to state and federal agencies.

Finding: Addressing the forest insect and disease problems as well as fuel loading has been a priority for the Forest Service and BLM since 2000. Laws and policy direction such the National Fire Plan and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act have funded fire suppression and expedited planning processes in an effort to deal with the issue.

Finding: The Forest Service and BLM have been realizing reduced funding for at least three decades resulting in reduced capacity to accomplish the mission to which it has been assigned. District offices have been closed, National Forests have been consolidated, and the workforce has been dramatically reduced.

Finding: The cost of suppressing wildland fires has increased in the past 15 years for a variety of reasons. The size and intensity of fires is greater than the period before 1990. More significantly, there are more people living in the Wildland Urban Interface, creating a tremendous expense to protect.

Recommendations: Implement the Good Neighbor Policy as described in the 2014 Farm Bill.

Recommendations: Given bark beetle and other forest insect and disease epidemics are contributing to fuel loading and threats to communities and a warming climate has been determined to be a factor in those disturbances, Montana should support efforts to reduce its carbon footprint. For example, by encouraging carbon capture, reducing emissions, supporting renewable energy sources, Montana can play a part in reducing greenhouse gases.